



# Age and the train

How younger and older people use the train

June 2020



**T**ransport Focus's latest research in partnership with Great Western Railway (GWR) looked at barriers to train travel, as seen by potential travellers in older and young age groups, as well as opportunities to broaden rail's appeal. The research was conducted before the coronavirus lockdown however the issues identified are relevant to planning future services after the virus.

We explored whether older travellers become more open to switching from their private car to the train for some or all of their travel. This could be triggered by age, medical or economic factors.

At the other end of the age spectrum, we explored the views of young people pre-car ownership, keen to develop their independence and to make journeys on their own or with friends.

Despite the differences between these two life-stages there are a number of striking similarities in the findings. It will be no surprise that both age groups value the freedom and flexibility of the private car but they also share similar views and have common needs and expectations of their rail service:

- There was a common view that the railway is not designed around their needs. Instead, they must 'put up with' and navigate around the inconveniences and confusion encountered

on a journey. For less regular passengers, navigating the railway requires a lot of effort.

- Good information and empathetic support from staff are seen as important in making journeys more enjoyable.
- Accessing the station is universally cited as a barrier, with car parks often full from the early hours, precluding parking for off peak travel. There is a desire for bus and train timetables to be better synchronised.
- Affordability and clarity of fares is also key. The ticketing system is seen as confusing and identifying the best value ticket is difficult. Affordability is a concern, particularly in relation to other modes of transport. There is a desire to see more offers specifically targeted at their age groups.

While our two age groups may be particularly sensitive to these issues, they are likely to apply to infrequent or non-users of rail whatever their age.

We hope this research will be useful not only to GWR but to all train companies working to get the country moving again after the lockdown.

**Nina Howe**

Senior Stakeholder Manager, Transport Focus



**W**e know older passengers want to retain as much independence and social connectivity as they can. Through this study, we have been able to delve deeply into the issues faced by older age groups travelling by rail, as well as how younger customers get to grips with their independence and widening social area.

Listening to both prospective and current customers as they deal with the possibility of not being able to have a car, and what a return to public transport means for some has given us a new understanding of their needs. At the other end of the age spectrum, talking to our future passengers starting to venture out on their own and with friends, has been enlightening.

By approaching these two age groups in one, detailed, research study with Transport Focus, it has been possible to appreciate the similarities between the two and that potential solutions for one are equally applicable to the other. The work also draws out the additional thinking that we will need to do as an industry to meet the needs of these groups, mindful of the implications of doing so.

I now look forward to working with our internal teams at GWR to bring these findings into our thinking and approaches in the coming months.

**Jeremy Clarke**

Head of Customer Research, Great Western Railway

## Introduction

This was a qualitative research project undertaken by the independent research agency 2CV on behalf of Transport Focus and Great Western Railway in 2018/19. The project was iterative in nature, allowing us to adapt our approach in the light of findings from one stage before going on to the next. In this way we were able to focus our findings on those most likely to be prospective future train travellers as the profile of these targets became clearer.

The work predates the coronavirus pandemic and it should be noted that both users' and non-users' attitudes towards rail travel will have changed as a result of the country's experience of 'lockdown', 'social

distancing' requirements and the use of face-coverings in public places. We might hypothesise that the younger cohort we spoke with may be quicker to return to or adopt train and bus travel. Meanwhile the older cohort may be more concerned about their health when using public transport particularly for those whose health is already compromised, but that would need to be the subject of further research.

On the pages that follow we reproduce the report provided by 2CV on completion of the full project. Individual slide presentations from each stage of the research may be found on the Transport Focus website.



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How younger and older people use the train

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# Age and the train – background and approach

The railways are receiving unprecedented investment to deliver improvements, including station renovations and new trains, track and systems. There is also work to improve customer experiences such as better pricing, railcards, online purchases and Wi-Fi. This is along with cross-industry efforts to help secure continued funding and improve customer experiences and perceptions of the railways.

In spite of these improvements, passenger numbers are falling for the first time in eight years, driven to an extent by a fall in season ticket sales. Opportunities to increase train use are limited as commuter services are at (or beyond) capacity and the market for off-peak travel is somewhat limited.

Transport Focus, in partnership with Great Western Railway, identified two audiences where there may be an opportunity to increase rail use and relevance:

- 1 young people:** an increasing number of young people are not applying for driving licences and are reliant on public transport for education, commuting or leisure trips
- 2 older people:** with benefits of discounts on public transport, potentially less confidence/enjoyment in driving and flexibility to travel off-peak.

This research explores the lives of people in these two diverse groups, and how the rail network can help attract them to the system and improve their experience. Our approach evolved as we narrowed into more specific audiences and experiences.

## Discovery: November 2018

Our starting point was discovery groups with pre-tasks with those aged 16-30 years and over-55 years, across Bristol, Worcester, Reading, London and Plymouth.

After this stage we decided to focus on the more extreme ends of the younger and older groups as those over 18 and under 70 years old were similar to other adult customer groups.

## Understanding independence: February–March 2019

To further understand the specifics of independence among younger and older audiences, we used a conversational approach built around a custom-designed board game. This involved mini friendship groups with 15-17 year olds and paired depth interviews with couples and friends aged over 70.

We chose these life-stages because of the opportunities for train travel to be further embedded or discarded as a choice. Teenagers on the cusp of driving are establishing habits that could last for decades. Older people who are starting to reconsider driving as a default option also represent an opportunity.

After this stage we decided to focus solely on older customers – to understand how to reduce barriers to rail travel and improve their experience.

## Experiencing the train: September–October 2019

Our final step was to use an online community of 24 non-rail users aged 66-88 years, followed by telephone interviews to understand experiences of train travel and identify areas for improvement. A key aspect of this stage was encouraging participants to visit their local railway station and travel on a train, documenting their experiences in real time.



# Younger audiences

# Younger audiences – who they are

## Different levels of independence that increase with age

When we talk about how younger people feel about the train and their opportunities and barriers to rail travel, it's important to remember that this is an extremely varied age group. Significant lifestyle and attitudinal changes occur between teenage years and early adulthood. This audience ranges from teenagers reliant on their parents for lifts to graduates and workers who are getting established in their career and home life. With this in mind, we have broken down the audience into stages based on how independent and confident they are.

**15-17 year olds** tend to be dependent on their parents for travel by providing lifts and paying for tickets. This can lead to awkwardness and conflict between them and their parents. They are the least confident and experienced in travelling and the most likely to be nervous about asking for help in a railway environment. The pressure of extra-curricular activities and achieving good school grades can lead them to feel they have very little free time to travel during the school year.

*"Me and my mum have a lot of arguments about lifts, because I do still need her to get places." 15-17 years*

**18-23 year olds** are more likely to be living away from home and are in the later stages of gaining financial independence. Their confidence is growing and they are making longer-distance trips with friends, partners or by themselves. They're often undergoing a lot of change – including going to university, starting a new job and moving house. This can be a good opportunity to embed new habits but may mean they become more dependent on using a private car.

**24-30 year olds** are in many ways the same as any other adult audience in their independence, degree of confidence and the way in which they consider and experience the train. However, cost can be a key concern for this audience.

## Increasing independence is important – and travel plays a role

Teenagers in particular are motivated to gain increasing independence, enabling them to live their lives away from the control and scrutiny of their parents. This path to independence is limited by lack of money, restrictions on how late they can stay out and how far they can travel, and having to ask for lifts from parents.

*"It felt really cool when I first travelled on the train by myself and didn't have to rely on my parents." 15-17 years*



# Younger people's attitude to travel and the train

*"The aim is to get away from public transport and into the car, it's the ultimate freedom."*

## **The car is still delivering the independence that young adults crave**

Owning and driving a car is still seen as an important step on the path to independence which other forms of transport, including the train, cannot match. It is a direct replacement for the lifts that many young people are reliant on from their parents – making it seem like a natural next step for them to learn to drive and get their own car. It is also still seen as an important life skill, a social enabler and helpful for expanding potential work opportunities.

## **Coach travel is seen as an attractive, comfortable and affordable option**

Young people (particularly 17-23 year olds) appreciated the modernity, customer focus and value for money that coach travel can provide. While not seen as perfect due to the long journey times, it was often the only financially viable option for longer trips around the UK.

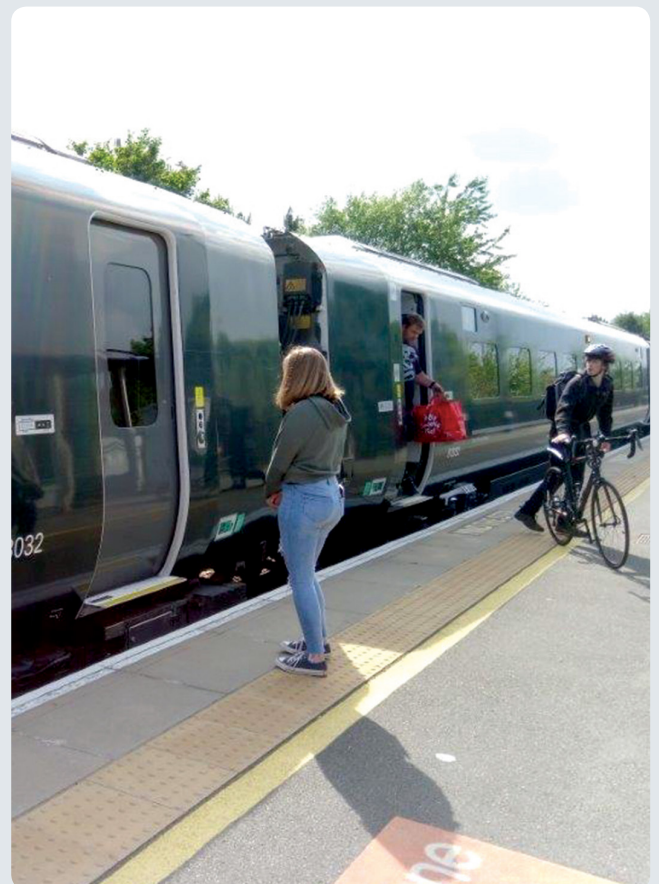
*"The coach has improved - more comfortable seats - more legroom, more cushions, you've got a guaranteed seat, plug sockets, Wi-Fi, storage space." 17-23 years*

## **Teenagers can feel low in confidence and lack resilience in taking the train**

For teenagers in particular, the railway can be seen as hostile and challenging. Younger people are more likely to need support – especially on longer and unfamiliar journeys and when arriving at their destination.

*"The ticket inspectors keep charging me too much - one tried to charge me an adult fare - I was in my school hoodie! It makes me feel stressed when they come up to you." 15-17 years*

*"It's like they see you're young and immediately think you are trouble, I feel embarrassed." 15-17 years*





# Addressing barriers – improving the rail experience for younger people

## Accessibility and cost concerns, and lack of confidence stop younger people using the train

### Reduce financial barriers to train travel

Price is a major barrier to uptake among most of this audience. Coach, bus, driving a car and even flying are all seen as cheaper options. Young people want more extensive discounts available, either targeted to their age group or through offering off-peak inducements such as flash sales. Young people often travel with friends, so group discounts could also be an appealing option and go some way to making train travel feel less expensive than the car or coach.

*"I'd love a Black Friday for trains, like all the cheap fares I can get when I have more free time in the summer."*

15-17 years

*"The prices seem to change all the time - I want clear pricing and updates if it is changed and why."*

15-17 years

### Help young people feel more confident and welcome on a system they feel nervous or confused about

Aside from price, there are other options to help younger audiences feel the train is a more natural option for them. Younger people want staff to be more approachable and less judgemental – it's important they do not intimidate or act superior to younger people. Staff should also be aware that younger passengers might feel embarrassed in new social situations – especially if they are surrounded by their peers.

*"I feel like they ask us for our tickets more than the adults, we should be treated the same."*

15-17 years

To make the system feel easier to navigate, station staff could proactively offer help to younger people without making them feel stupid. Communications, how-to guides and posters could also help in creating an environment where it's acceptable to be learning how the system works.

Technology could also be used to deliver this – for example by optimising the GWR app to advise and reassure them when things go wrong with their journey (such as missed interchanges).

*"I feel safer flying on my own than I do taking the train for an unfamiliar journey."*

18-23 years

The ticketing system is difficult to understand, and would benefit from simplification or more guidance on how customers can get the lowest fare.

### Make rail easier to access

Younger people (teenagers in particular) do not want to rely on their parents or others to get lifts to the station. We recommend working with local authorities to enable easier access to the railway stations, for example by aligning bus schedules or providing secure cycle parking.

*"Pleeeeeease get the bus service to match up so I can get the bus to the station. This would be a GAME CHANGER!"*

15-17 years



# Older audiences

# Older audiences – who they are

*"We've gone from seize the day to seize the hour!"*

## **Health problems, experience of loss, and gaining grandchildren are the most significant changes in older people's lives**

As with the younger age group, older people's lives, needs and circumstances change considerably over this phase. Changes during the years from 55-80 plus years of age are linked to physical and mental health.

*"I used to get around quite a bit, I used to drive and visit friends and various places. I used to get the train to visit family. I don't do any of those things anymore because I don't have the confidence to do it. My social life is now dependent on my family; visiting my son and daughter. My daughter carts me around - she's very good."* 70+ years

## **A big part of getting older is self-preservation**

Old age can make maintaining health and independence hard. Looking after their physical health is a top priority so they can be there for the people and other commitments in their life. Managing and maintaining health is their fuel for independence as without it, their worlds become smaller and limited. Careful budgeting allows them to live within their means with some room for occasional treats.

*"Keeping healthy is the most important thing. I've not been able to do so much since my knee, but once I have the operation I'm hoping to be up and about again."* 70+ years

*"We eat incredibly healthily to increase our chances of seeing our grandchildren finish school, or if we're lucky, graduate university."* Married couple, 70+ years

## **Making the most of their lives now is a priority and they have more time than ever to travel for leisure**

They treasure seeing their family, from fleeting moments to quality time. They have a lot of interests and hobbies, and love to be spontaneous.

*"I welcomed retirement as I have more time to spend with my granddaughters and having more 'me time'. I have started getting out and about more and visiting new places."*

*My health has gone downhill slightly over the last five years which is due to increasing age but generally nothing sinister."* 65-70 years

*"My wife and I spend many weekends visiting different places while I am still fit to drive. We also use our bus passes when possible and also go for walks. We belong to the National Trust and have visited many sites particularly since my wife retired."* 70+ years

## **Many are car-dependent, but expecting to be less tolerant of driving over time**

While many older people are still reliant on their cars for both short and longer journeys, there was an understanding that driving would become more challenging in the future. Some had friends and relatives who had already had to give up their driving licence and there was a fear of how they would cope without.

*"Not being able to drive has meant a huge loss in independence. Luckily my wife can drive otherwise there would be an even bigger loss."* 70+ years

For others, longer car journeys were already feeling uncomfortable and difficult. Some were starting to plan their days and travel to avoid driving at night or over long distances.

# Older people's attitudes to travel and the train

*"Getting the train requires getting up much earlier, it's a lot more effort for me and I don't have enough energy in my pot!"*

## Older people can have either idealistic or negative expectations of train travel

For those with less recent experience of taking the train, their perceptions and attitudes came from earlier in life.

Some associated train travel with nostalgia and memory. They recalled steam trains puffing along, the sound of trains on the track, and the countryside views. They had positive, exciting associations of taking the train for holidays, trips and visiting family.

*"As a child we often travelled from Yorkshire to Pembrokeshire by train. Rail journeys still have that element of excitement and expectation." 70+ years*

Others felt intimidated at the thought of train travel based on their experience in earlier life. Having previously commuted for work, their memories and expectations of train travel are that it's busy and crowded.

*"There were times when trains were delayed or cancelled, when I couldn't get a seat and had to stand for hours." 65-70 years*

## The thought of rail travel is full of uncertainties they would rather avoid

Regardless of their attitudes and previous experience, many lacked confidence in using the rail network. Due to unfamiliarity with train travel many worry about what to do when things do not go to plan such as with train delays and changing platforms.

- **Physical accessibility** – while still active and able, some are limited by ageing and illness or could be travelling with others who need step-free access. Some talked of the fear of having to change platforms in a rush or of carrying luggage up and down stairs without support. They may need reassurance about accessibility, that it will be safe and they won't have any falls.
- **Watching the pennies** – they have leisure time but need to spend their money wisely. The uncertain costs of the train rather than the perceived certainty of other modes can be a deterrent.
- **The first and last mile** – the effort required can feel

too much, especially if the last mile is in the evening. Their shortcuts to make this easier would involve taxis or asking for lifts which bring their own barriers – cost or convenience.

- **Fear and distress** – if things go wrong they feel less resilient and able to cope than they might have done earlier in life. This led to a lot of pre-planning for some, so that they could be prepared but even then there was anxiety about possible disruption.
- **Lack of comfort** – they fear sitting or standing for too long on journeys, being cold, cramped, and being around antisocial behaviour. They would need to feel confident that toilet facilities were functional, clean, accessible and available throughout their journey.

*"I can't imagine doing a journey that has an interchange - I need it to be simple and direct." 70+ years*

## They are most motivated to travel by train when they feel prepared

As a result of these fears and uncertainties, many older rail passengers were planning ahead to make sure they were well-informed and prepared. This involved arranging assistance with staff, reserving seats, saving important websites as bookmarks and travelling by day.

*"There is more opportunity now than ever to feel prepared for a train journey, you can research online, speak to staff, speak to your kids for reassurance." 70+ years*

Planning ahead cannot fully remove the barriers to train travel. Even with thorough journey planning some are still left worrying about the things that are out of their control that could potentially ruin their plans. For others, the more they felt prepared, the less tolerant they were when things went wrong. This led to frustration that they couldn't plan to avoid disruption and made them less willing to try the train again.

# Understanding the inconsistencies of the rail journey for older people

For the older people who participated in our research, the experience of travelling by train was at times disappointing, stressful and frustrating but could also be positive and enjoyable.

The experience is inconsistent, both considering the highs and lows of the journey and also how each station and service varies.

## Getting to the train station was challenging

Those driving to the station found it difficult to park as most of the spaces had been taken by commuters travelling at peak time.

*"It's not easy to get to the station by car because of the [lack of available] parking. I usually rely on a lift from someone to get places, or I'd get a taxi." 70+ years*

## Getting to the platform

The experience was inconsistent and varied depending on the station. Most found the signage, tannoy announcements and staff assistance to be clear, helpful and informative.

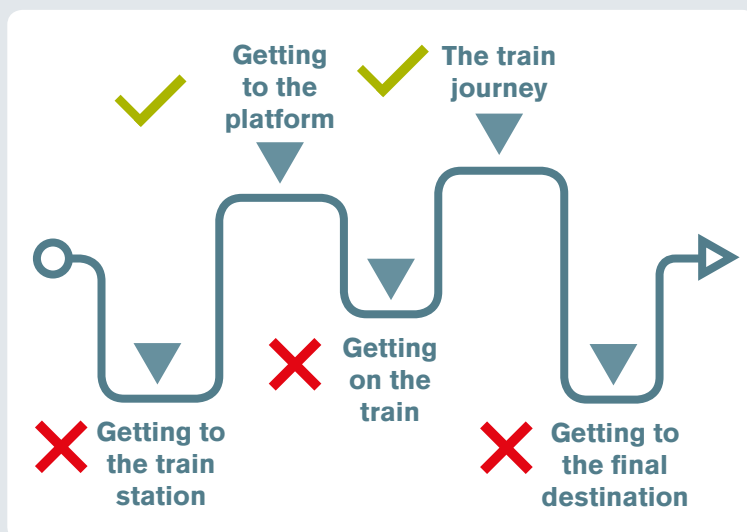
The most common concern at stations was the fear of getting to the right platform on time.

*"I was waiting on the wrong platform and the connection was two steep footbridges away. Carrying heavy luggage I had to go as fast as I could to catch the train which I did with only a few minutes to spare. It was a very stressful and tiring experience." 70+years*

## The platform experience can be problematic

On the platform there are many things that could go wrong or lead to worry:

- not having anywhere to sit - some train stations do not have suitable seating or areas to shelter from bad weather
- the train being delayed, and the added stress of missing a connecting train
- not knowing where to board – many were confused as to where they should stand on the platform to get to their designated carriage
- not being able to get a seat
- having to ask someone to move out of their seat.



## The train journey itself was often the most pleasant part of the journey

Once settled in their seat, people were able to appreciate the ease of taking the train in comparison to having to concentrate when driving a car.

*"I actually like taking the train, as I can rest, read or just look out the window. I drive a lot and this requires concentrating much more. On the train I can relax, I can read, nod off, or just look out the window and it is peaceful and I'm in my own thoughts." 70+ years*

The facilities, cleanliness and level of maintenance were sometimes disappointing, although this did vary.

## Getting to the final destination

The final leg of the journey was challenging. It was an added inconvenience and/or expense to arrange additional travel to get to where they want to go. This compares poorly to car travel where they can easily arrive at their desired destination.

*"Travelling by train is comparatively inconvenient for anything other than long journeys. I have to get to the station and park the car (at a cost) and on arrival at the destination I would have to get a lift or a taxi. It would be a repeat of the above for the return journey." 70+ years*

# Addressing barriers – improving the rail experience for older people

## Accessibility, facilities and service concerns stop older people using the train

### Improving accessibility

Access to railway stations and platforms was a consistent problem. Many were frustrated by the experience of getting to their local railway station. We recommend prioritising improved access to train stations by aligning bus and train schedules and providing reserved car parking for off-peak users.

Station design should also aim to reduce gaps between platform and train, and improve step-free access to the train, station and platforms (through ramps and lifts).

### Making the train a more attractive option

Improvements can be made to help older audiences feel acknowledged and considered throughout:

- proactive staff who recognise when older people need support, help or information
- provide warm and comfortable waiting spaces on platforms
- make it clear where customers are to stand on the platform to board their particular coach
- ensure timetable boards are clear to read and tannoy are clear to hear.

*"If someone came and said hello and asked you how you are and if you want something from the trolley so you aren't just treated like a number." 70+ years*



### Overcoming the fundamental barriers

Changing the built environment and the behaviour of staff alone will not be enough to encourage older audiences to take the train more often. Compared to the default option of the car, the fundamental barriers are that it is inconvenient to access and that the coach, car and bus all feel cheaper.

### Improving the experience on board the train

Older people had a greater need for information on the journey – ensure this is enabled through continued access to their devices (through Wi-Fi) and onboard information. Consider accessibility within trains – walking over suitcases to get to toilets was mentioned as a negative experience.





# Overarching findings – recommendations for improvement

Despite occupying opposite ends of the age spectrum, there are similarities between these two audiences that are worth considering when designing and delivering the rail experience. Neither audience felt that the train was designed for them or was 'age-friendly'.

The benefits of these changes will likely stretch beyond these two audiences to all passengers, regardless of age, confidence and ability.

## Designing the experience to make it accessible and easy for these age groups

Getting to the local railway station can be challenging and off-putting for both audiences who were more likely to travel to railway stations after the morning peak and therefore would struggle to find available car parking. Both audiences wanted bus and train schedules to be more closely-aligned.

## Reviewing fares and ticketing

Both audiences felt a disconnect between the price they were paying and what the service delivered. Younger users felt the pain primarily on price, while older users felt the experience was not justified. The cheaper cost of travelling by coach and car have made this even more stark.

A common theme from both younger and older audiences was their experience of ticketing. They find the variety of ticket options available confusing. They want the ticketing system both to be clearer and to offer cheaper tickets to them based on their age group and off-peak travel habits.

## Using education and communication to improve confidence

As audiences who have limited previous experience, they found aspects of the system to be unintuitive and confusing. As the train isn't part of their routine, it requires more effort to consider it for new or discretionary journeys.

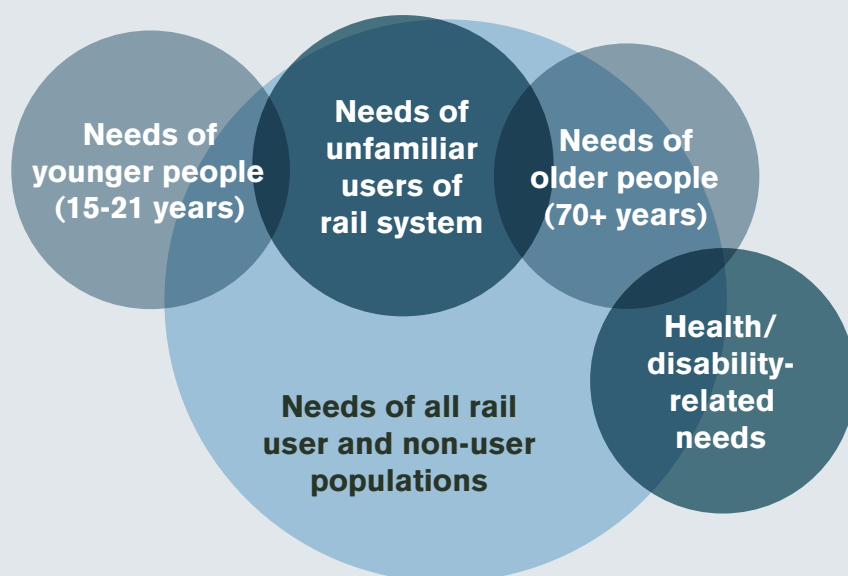
Despite having different approaches to planning, both audiences appreciated clear guidance. They often looked for staff to provide support in stations and on-board trains.

## The train can provide valuable opportunities

Despite these limitations, the train can help both age groups spend time with the ones they love (kids, partners, friends, parents, grandparents). They:

- help younger people explore and experience new things
- help older people to keep their independence as they become less able/confident to drive.

Rail travel presents opportunities for both audiences in replacing long distance trips which can be onerous by car or coach.



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Transport Focus is the operating  
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